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Author(s): Staffan Marklund

Source: *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990), pp. 125-140

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4200787>

Accessed: 17/02/2009 06:50

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Structures of Modern Poverty

Staffan Marklund

Department of Social Work, Stockholm University

The current debate on poverty in the Western world is influenced by concepts such as the feminization of poverty, marginalization of the poor, the poor underclass and the culture of poverty. These concepts are often used in a contradictory and confusing manner. This article is an attempt to look at the theoretical position behind the concepts and to examine similarities and differences between them. Furthermore, the empirical consequences of the four concepts are analyzed and related to information about poverty in the Scandinavian nations. As empirically investigated by Scandinavians, poverty does not in general fit into either of the four conceptualizations. Neither the feminization-of-poverty debate nor the debate on the culture of poverty seems relevant to Scandinavia. The underclass and marginalization concepts are more frequently used, but due to both theoretical inconsistency and lack of relevant data the two views are rarely tested against each other or, indeed, tested at all.

1. Introduction

Recent reviews of poverty research in the Anglo-Saxon world are frequently using concepts such as feminization, marginalization, underclass or subculture (Hess 1983; Hill 1985; Wilson & Aponte 1985; Danziger & Weinberg 1986; Abrahamson et al 1987). These concepts do not constitute agreed theoretical frameworks, nor do they constitute conflicting positions in the explanation of poverty. The concepts of underclass, marginalization and subculture are often used analogously in the American literature and without clear definitions. On the other hand, the concept of feminization is used in opposing ways both by scholars who agree and disagree with the feminization of poverty thesis.

A crude way of getting a picture of the use of concepts in poverty research is to look through the indexes of *Sociological Abstracts*. Poverty research has been indexed since the 1960s but one should be aware of the fact that fewer publications and more crude conceptual measurements were used in the earlier period. There is also a strong Anglo-American bias in the material. With these reservations in mind, however, some conclusions can be drawn. The first is that only few poverty references relate to any specific theoretical concept whatsoever. Even fewer relate to the four concepts mentioned here. Only about 10 per cent of references to articles and books on poverty have a specific reference to feminization, culture of poverty, marginalization and underclass. A second conclusion is that there are fashionable tendencies on the conceptual level. While the culture of poverty concept

dominated during the 1960s and 1970s, the concepts of feminization and underclass have become popular during the 1980s. The idea of marginality has remained important over the years, largely due to a constant interest in marginalization in European poverty research. The feminization perspective is largely an application of general feminist theories to poverty. It has produced a large number of articles since the concept feminization of poverty was introduced in 1978 (Pearce 1978). The monolithic character of poverty research is parallel to the public debate on poverty. Macnicol as well as Hilgartner and Bosk have shown that the public debate allows often only one view at a time to dominate (Macnicol 1987; Hilgartner & Bosk 1988).

Before presenting the four perspectives a few words have to be said about the concept of poverty itself. There is a large literature on how poverty should be defined and measured but this is not the place to go into that debate. In this article a so called policy definition is seen as most appropriate. The pragmatic reason is that most of the studies that are referred to define poverty in relationship to various types of official or unofficial poverty lines. The US official poverty line is used either to classify people who must be regarded as poor or as a basis for comparing different parts of the population according to economic living standards. In Britain a similar line can be used through the supplementary benefits level, which however is not strictly a poverty line since some people may well not qualify for supplementary benefits despite low levels of income and some people may for various reasons exceed the level and still qualify. The same is true for the Scandinavian countries which also do not have official poverty lines. In these nations studies are often based either on a formal definition of those whose income falls below the level of means-tested social assistance or on those who actually claim means-tested assistance.

Thus, most of the studies that are referred to in this paper are not dealing with poverty in general but with such poverty as is socially recognized through poverty lines or social-assistance levels. This way of defining poverty is therefore in accordance with the one that George Simmel presented in his famous article on poverty in 1908. He defines poverty in the following way:

Sociologically speaking it is not the lack of resources which defines a poor person. A poor person is someone who because of such scarcities receives public support or should receive public support according to existing social norms (Simmel 1908:490, my translation).

Policy-oriented definitions of poverty have the advantage of being directed toward societal causes of poverty and toward national social policies. But they are not ideal for strict comparison between nations as differences in generosity in the national poverty levels are not accounted for.

2. Marginalization

The four perspectives will be looked at with regard to their views on poverty at three different levels: a structural level, a demographic level and an individual level. It should be noted that the four perspectives are not conclusive in these

respects. While the underclass, marginalization and feminization perspectives are generally focusing on structures, the subcultural perspective focuses on groups and individuals.

In some studies the *marginalization* concept is used to describe a wide range of problems of exclusion (Germani 1980) while other studies refer more specifically to the problem of persistent poverty (Duncan 1984; Harrington 1984; Duncan & Hoffman 1986). The main focus in the marginalization tradition is on those social mechanisms that make it hard or impossible for parts of the population to support themselves, to withhold an autonomous private economy or participate in conventional social activities. Lack of sufficient economic resources is usually seen as the main problem, but other material shortages or social shortcomings may lead to exclusion from normal activities in the society (Germani 1980:10–20).

In understanding change over time the marginalization perspective is concerned with the degree to which the poor are separated from the rest of the population and the degree of persistence in poverty. The marginal position is seen as rather permanent and not much affected by changes in numbers of poor people (Harrington 1984). Thus, the concept of *polarization* should not be used analogously with marginalization as polarization has to do with changes in the distribution of living standards for the whole population or large sections of it. It follows that it is not logically impossible to talk about increasing marginalization along with decreasing polarization. If a small group of poor people is becoming increasingly excluded despite a more even distribution of living standards in the population at large we may talk about marginalization but not about polarization.

Most, but not all, scholars who use the marginalization concept would also regard poverty as endemic in the sense that particular groups of people are at a higher risk of becoming poor (Duncan 1984:48–50, 92). This is often interpreted as a process of social inheritance or in terms of chronic poverty linked to policy mechanisms such as poverty traps in the provision of welfare (Germani 1980). Thus, the perspective is most applicable to explain why parts of the poor remain poor over longer periods of time.

As mentioned, theories of marginalization are primarily concerned with the already poor. Often, selected groups of hard-core poor are in focus (Harrington 1984; Murray 1984). Explanations of the causes of poverty are linked to the unique situations of this particular group (Murray 1984). The fact that many remain poor over long periods of time is interpreted in terms of lack of relevant resources such as education and labor-market experience (Kilson 1981; Wilson 1985). Studies of the long-term unemployed and long-term poor show strong negative correlations with education and labor-market capacity (Abrahamson *et al.* 1987).

3. Underclass

Contrary to marginalization, the underclass perspective conceptually claims that there is a continuous flow of people from the working class to the poor and from the poor to the working class. Despite this fact there are considerable similarities between the two perspectives. A large part of the North American literature is using the underclass concept when referring to marginality or subcultural patterns. Auletta includes criminals, drug addicts and the homeless as well as the long-term

unemployed in his definition of the underclass (Auletta 1982:28). Similarly, Glasgow defines underclass as 'the permanently oppressed population of poor, unneeded and unwanted that gather in particular parts of the country' (Glasgow 1980:3). Thus, Auletta and Glasgow are both defining the underclass concept more in line with what is here called marginality.

The two Marxist concepts of *lumpenproletariat* and *reserve army* may illustrate an essential theoretical difference between marginality and underclass. The underclass perspective is analogous to that of the reserve army in the claim that the poor underclass is recruited from and eventually 'recaptured' by the working class. There is a continuous flow of members between the poor underclass and the working class. Thus, in the underclass perspective the poor are seen as part of a larger class structure and poverty is seen as a transient condition for those who are hit. The risk of becoming poor may vary between individuals of the lower parts of the working class and may also vary in relationship to unemployment levels and general economic conditions, but the risk of remaining poor over a long period of time is low (Duncan 1984; Duncan & Hoffman 1986).

Contrary to this, the lumpenproletariat and the marginality concepts are linked to the persistence of poverty, the exclusion of the poor from the class structure and their exclusion from conventional activities in the society at large.

The underclass perspective focuses on the continuity in the distribution of income and living standards in the population, where the poor are just an arbitrarily defined lowest income section. Duncan has shown how different definitions of poverty affect the numbers in poverty. Large parts of the American population are very close to the official poverty level but few remain poor over long periods of time (Duncan 1984:35–38). Over a ten-year period almost 25 per cent of the population was defined as poor at least during one year, most of them only temporarily (Duncan & Hoffman 1986:34). A number of studies have also shown that most of the poor are recruited from the lower working-class sections (Hill 1985; Wilson & Aponte 1985; Danziger & Gottschalk 1987; Gimenez 1987).

Popular concepts such as 'the deprivation cycle' and 'inherited poverty' both see poverty as self-reproducing. They have traits in common with the marginalization perspective as well as with the subculture view. A disturbing difficulty is that empirical support is contradictory. American studies often find large differences between blacks and whites and between females and males with respect to poverty risks (Kilson 1981; Hess 1983; McLanahan 1985; Danziger & Gottschalk 1987). This leads one to suspect that the social inheritance phenomenon cannot be applied generally.

4. Subculture

Although the concept of subculture seems to have come out of fashion in recent years it has obvious similarities with the concept of marginality as used here. The theory of subculture was originally developed within social anthropology and ethnology to describe living conditions among ethnic minorities. Specific cultural patterns observed among poor people are interpreted in terms of an adjustment to external forces and as focal to an understanding of poverty itself (Lewis 1968:48).

These external forces are rarely empirically substantiated in the subculture perspective, but form a structural background within which the poverty culture thrives. As one of its most well-known proponents writes:

The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaption to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. (. . .) Low wages, chronic unemployment and underemployment lead to low income, lack of property ownership, absence of savings, absence of food reserves in the home, and a chronic shortage of cash. These conditions reduce the possibility of effective participation in the larger economic system (Lewis 1968:50-51).

The popularity of the subcultural perspective is due to its widespread studies of ethnical or other homogeneous groups (Abrahamson et al. 1987). Minorities of the large American cities and youth gangs in Europe are the major sources of information. Exclusion from work, political participation and lack of useful social networks are seen to lead to psychological adaptation in the form of learned and socially inherited passivity and helplessness (Rabow et al. 1983).

Only few recent studies have an explicit reference to the culture of poverty but concepts such as time orientation, adaption and learned helplessness are frequently being researched in the social-psychology literature. (Rabow et al. 1983; Peterson & Seligman 1984; Carmon 1985; Kutner & Kutner 1987). Studies of modern poverty have only in limited aspects accepted Lewis's argument that poor people may have deviant lifestyles or value orientations to work and society. On the contrary, most studies reveal that the poor form rather conventional attitudes in most respects (Carmon 1985). A Swedish study points out that thieves and drug addicts lead very ordinary lives and share opinions that are largely in tune with that of the average population (Åkerström 1983).

On the other hand it is interesting to note that the theoretical orientation of newer youth research is similar to subculture theory. German as well as British studies point out that young people are dependent on external forces such as unemployment and economic change but they concentrate their interest on adjustment and coping strategies as well as on psychological patterns and organized alienation of the young (Willis 1977; Ziehe & Stubenrauch 1983; Brake 1985). Swedish followers in the subculture tradition are also predominantly concerned with 'style' and psychological reactions although references to structural differences between groups of youth are sometimes given (Sernhede 1984; Fornäs et al. 1984; Hermansson 1988). Even in the case of the young poverty is seen as being created by external social mechanisms, but contrary to the culture of poverty theory, cultural adaption of the young does not take place within the family but in gangs or peer-group associations. Again, the perspective does not contradict structural explanations of poverty but focuses on psychological group mechanisms (Hermansson 1988).

5. Feminization

Theories concerned with the feminization of poverty are not in contradiction to either of the earlier mentioned perspectives (Burnham 1985; Rodgers 1987). Despite a shared focus on feminization, however, the perspective consists of two slightly different interpretations. One originates from general feminist theory and regards

the fact that women fall into poverty more often than men as an effect of the oppression of women in society, labor market and family (Ehrenreich & Fox Piven 1984; Nelson 1984; Scott 1984; Rose 1986; Goldberg & Kremen 1987; Peterson 1987). Sexual oppression is parallel to and strengthens class differences in the society (Gimenez 1987). Poverty affects women because they are at the bottom on the labor market and because they often are sole supporters of children.

Another feminist position focuses on the breakdown of the nuclear family. This causes poverty as private mutual economic support systems break down and increasing numbers of single women raise children. Women become the prime victims of such a process due to their reproductive responsibility (Pearce 1983; Norris 1984; McLanahan 1985; Bane 1986; Wilson & Neckerman 1986). This perspective should strictly speaking perhaps not be called feminist as it focuses on the family rather than on gender differences, but as women are also in a disadvantageous position at the family level it is not easily distinguished from the feminist perspective. However, the two different versions of the feminization of poverty thesis will be kept analytically separate as they have different policy implications and are based on different empirical grounds.

The feminization thesis in its family-breakdown version contains comparisons between different family constellations rather than between the sexes. Thus, single mothers are regularly in the focus of the debate on the feminization of poverty. In most societies single mothers are undoubtedly at a high risk of becoming poor, and the reported increasing numbers of women in poverty are therefore related to the increasing proportion of single mothers in most nations. However, there are large variations between nations. The family-breakdown version of the feminization argument seems valid for the USA and Canada, but less so for Great Britain or for the Nordic nations as shown in comparative or national studies (Norris 1984; Abowitz 1986; Goldberg & Kremen 1987).

In the structuralist feminist version, poverty among women is not primarily seen as a matter of disrupted family support systems but primarily related to the position of women on the labor market and in the welfare system. Women more often than men suffer from low wages, poor working conditions and work prospects. As a result of these labor-market mechanisms but sometimes independently of them, women are also discriminated against in relation to the provision of social security benefits (Rose 1986; Gimenez 1987). The combined effect of larger needs, a weaker market situation and discrimination in the welfare system forces women into open poverty more often than men. The test of this argument is more complicated as one should ideally keep differences in family pattern between men and women under control. The fact that are very few single fathers disrupts such a strategy. Comparative studies, however limited, seem to support the fact that women are more exposed to poverty whether single or married and whether mothers or not (Norris 1984; Hill 1985; Abowitz 1986; Goldberg & Kremen 1987). But they also point at the positive effects on sex differences in poverty of a more equal income distribution and extensive public welfare programs (Norris 1984; Goldberg & Kremen 1987).

6. Comparing the different perspectives

To scrutinize available and possible empirical support or disagreements the various perspectives have to be simplified and forced even further. The four perspectives will

be looked at on three levels: general structural explanation of poverty, demographic perspective and individual poverty mechanisms. All four perspectives have some aspirations on all these levels but they present various degrees of specific causal focus at the different levels.

The underlying belief is that, at least by implication, the four perspectives could be tested empirically at different levels. On the structural level the strength of a perspective could be verified through historical or cross-national comparative studies where there is some variation in 'structure'. On the demographic level, theories of poverty may be tested through comparisons of different groups of poor with the non poor or through comparing subgroups of the poor. Often this is done by looking at relative poverty risks in various parts of the population. On the level of individual poverty mechanisms the empirical evidence is concerned with why and how a particular individual or family has become poor or remains poor. Thus, data based on individuals or families are required. Usually also a retrospective analysis of life events is needed to find processes that led to initial poverty. Each of the four perspectives deals differently with each of these levels of causation.

Marginalization and underclass perspectives of poverty are both concerned with general political and economic factors such as real incomes, income distributions, negative effects of taxes and transfers, and exclusion processes in working life. Thus, they both put a strong emphasis on structural factors related to poverty. One major difference between the two views is the time perspective. Proponents of the marginalization concept are in most cases interested in long historical perspectives and in such changes in structures that affect selected small sections of the population (Germani 1980; Macnicol 1987). Users of the underclass perspective, on the other hand, are concerned with shorter or medium-length perspectives of changes for the lower parts of the working class. Duncan is making this distinction explicit by showing the difference between the majority of the poor who are only temporarily in poverty and a smaller segment of long-term or persistent poor (Duncan 1984:41ff.; Duncan & Hoffman 1986:39).

The literature on subculture is rarely specific or empirical in its claim about structural causes of poverty. It has been vividly criticized for an individualistic bias and even for legitimating and mystifying poverty on this ground (Valentine 1968). To the extent that a subcultural perspective is possible to research on the structural level one should require studies of cultures of poverty in different nations or at different points in time. One particular issue would be to ask why subcultures of poverty are more usual in North America than in western Europe, or why American social scientists have traditionally been more concerned with studies of subculture than have their European colleagues. The only existing study which attempts empirically to test the Lewis thesis on a structural level is Carmon's small study of poverty in Israel (Carmon 1985). She did not find substantive support of a correlation between the different levels of explanation. Politically poor and people with limited social contacts did not report hopelessness or low self-esteem, nor did children of poor parents express poverty related norms similar to those of their mothers (Carmon 1985).

As theories of feminization fall into two different kinds they will also have two rather different views on structural causes. In the 'family dissolution' version, urbanization, modernization and industrialization are seen as the prime factors

behind the gradual breakdown of the nuclear family and the subsequent hardship for women with small children. Thus, the empirical test is interested in divorce rates, rates of unmarried mothers and premariage birth rates in different nations and over time.

In the radical 'feminist' version, women are not seen solely as mothers with small children. Labor-market disadvantages, low wages and exclusion from other sources of support are in focus, not the family. An attempt to test this version of feminist theory would thus ideally include comparing nations with different labor-market situations for women, different wage differentials according to gender or differences in terms of the welfare position of women. Two studies have used this strategy and they both found that the feminization of poverty is not a general phenomenon and that nations with more advanced labor-market positions of women and welfare policies may partly avoid it (Norris 1984; Goldberg & Kremen 1987).

Differences on this level between the four perspectives have all to do with how the social structure is treated and with what part of the structure one is concerned. A striking similarity between the perspectives is that almost all recent studies of poverty are concerned with public social policies as causes of or reliefs from poverty. Contrary to most of the classical studies, who did not put much emphasis on public policy, today's poverty research focuses on welfare policies, fiscal policies, labor-market policies and incomes policies as the vital part of the social structure which explains variations in poverty (Danziger & Haveman & Plotnick 1981, Golberg & Kremen 1987).

Not surprisingly, large parts of recent poverty research are concentrated on a study of demographic differences by the use of aggregated data on economic conditions, family, age, regional distribution, ethnicity, labor-market positions and health. Despite the fact the four perspectives in this respect lead to rather conflicting views, few studies explicitly aim at testing one perspective against another. One exception is an article by Danziger and Gottschalk (1987) where the spatial concentration of poor blacks and the development of an urban black underclass is verified by income and labor-force statistics comparing white and black families.

The conflicting demographic views of the two feminist perspectives is made explicit in articles by Bane (1986) and Besharov and Quin (1987). Both point to large differences between various categories of female-headed households. Divorced mothers and widows are much less likely to be poor than never married mothers (Besharov & Quin 1987). Increasing proportions of poverty are caused by family breakdown but the majority of the poor are still living in male-headed families (Bane 1986:210-220). There are pronounced differences between white and black females as well as between different categories of singles.

The differences between the four perspectives are more obvious on the micro level as compared to what has been seen on the structural and demographic levels. Most explanations of individual poverty are based on multifactor models where large numbers of factors are seen as contributory to poverty in the individual case.

The marginalization perspective sees individual poverty as a consequence of gradual exclusion from labor markets and autonomous support systems (Germani 1980:11; Harrington 1984:123 ff.; Murray 1984:129-132). When an individual has suffered from unemployment for a long time or been unable to enter the labor force, a number of secondary resources will also be weakened; social networks,

time structure, credit rating, skills or motivation to work (Caplovitz 1967, 1976). The empirical results from studies of marginal groups are often dubious and impossible to generalize since they are based only on limited aspects and selected samples of marginal poor.

As interpreted here proponents of the underclass perspective do not as a rule regard poor people as deviant. One interesting consequence of this fact is that the underclass explanation of the individual's poverty often focuses on a particular episode in the life of that individual rather than on personal attributes or values. A personal crisis due to separation or unemployment are examples of such 'normal' life episodes. Thus, the underclass perspective assumes that the fall into poverty is not primarily linked to long processes of shortage of resources but to specific events (Duncan 1984:81).

Individual poverty is in the feminist paradigms linked mainly to life events or episodes as in the underclass perspective. Specifically, separation, divorce or childbirth are such causes. But elements similar to the marginalization view on individual mechanisms are also common, particularly when looking at young mothers who have never been able to work and whose educational and social resources are limited.

To sum up one may say that on the structural level theories of poverty are surprisingly similar. In so far as representatives of the different perspectives present a distinct structural analysis they all focus on inequalities and injustice in the distribution of material goods between different sections of society. An obvious ambition is to look at social policies as a particularly important part of the social structure. Even subcultural perspectives locate causes in the structure of the society although some of the critics claim that they are biased toward individual and psychological explanations of poverty.

At a demographic level the four perspectives are more divided. To some degree the main differences arise when defining relevant subgroups of the population. The marginalization and subculture proponents are looking at marginal groups of persistent poor and the flow in and out of poverty for the temporary poor respectively. In the tradition of the culture of poverty the permanent poor are also in focus but less emphasis is made on demographic comparisons. Feminists are dealing either with categories of families representing family breakdown or with gender differences in work and social-welfare systems. In both versions demographic information plays an important role.

In analyzing mechanisms involved in the individual's recruitment to poverty there is an interesting similarity between three of the four perspectives. Marginalization, underclass and feminist proponents generally regard specific life events such as the loss of employment, separation and child birth as mechanisms that may lead to poverty in the individual case. In studies of subcultures as well as in some of the marginalization writing the processes are more long term. Individuals are often seen as victims of inherited behavioral patterns linked to the culture of poverty. Thus, an important element in discriminating as to why some and not all individuals in a culture of poverty actually become poor is people's attitudes and values.

The differences between the four perspectives can be summarized as in Table 1. The differences should not be stretched too far. As mentioned, marginalization and underclass perspectives are in most respects rather similar, and in other cases the

Table 1. *Differences between perspectives at different levels of explanation.*

	Marginalization	Underclass	Subculture	Feminization
Structure	Inequality	Class	Race Culture	Gender
Demography	Subproletariat	Classes Reserve army	Ethnic groups	Single mothers Male/female
Mechanism	Permanent exclusion	Temporary problems	Learned help- lessness	Family break- down

differences between marginalization and subculture are also small. Another problem is that the feminization perspective in both theoretical and practical terms consists of two different versions that have been called the family-breakdown perspective and the radical-feminist perspective.

7. Poverty in Scandinavia

Because of the superficial nature of the presentation of the four perspectives one can only discuss their relevance in relationship to poverty in present-day Scandinavia in general terms.

In a recent study of poverty and poverty responses in the US and Scandinavia in the 1980s, Abrahamson found similarities as well as differences in developments (Abrahamson 1988). While poverty in the US is concentrated in the inner cities it is more often located on the city periphery in Scandinavia. While crime rates are high among the American poor this does not seem to be the case in Scandinavia. While the Scandinavian poor are highly dependent on public social policies, the American poor population is dependent both on public and private relief. Furthermore, unemployment and irregular labor-market participation is a shared pattern, but the level of unemployment is lower in Scandinavia and among the Scandinavian poor (*ibid.*:34–35). Korpi pointed out in an analysis of poverty research in the USA that Nordic research is focused on unemployment and American on motivation and demography (Korpi 1980). The difference may have to do with how poverty is defined, but also relates to differences in dominating policy orientation. Svedberg has pointed out that studies of the distribution of resources have in Scandinavia often been seen in contradiction to studies of poverty (Svedberg 1988:46).

In all of the four Nordic nations, the poverty level increased in the 1980s as indicated by the share of the population on means-tested social assistance (Marklund 1988). Denmark has had a constant high level since the mid-1970s. The main reason behind the high and increasing proportions of people in poverty is largely due to high levels of unemployment and decreasing real wages in the country over the period 1975 to 1985. One exception in this respect is Norway which had extremely low levels of unemployment and stable real wages due to the benefits of its North Sea oil exploitation. The four Scandinavian nations are similar with respect to demographic conditions, class composition, family structures, labor-market conditions and public welfare. Similarities and variations in these respects can therefore be used to explain variations in the poverty rates.

The numbers of social assistance beneficiaries in Denmark had already increased dramatically in the mid-1970s, when the other three nations had low and decreasing levels. Most studies show a clear correlation with unemployment (Jørgensen & Thaulow 1984; Hansen et al. 1987). A majority of the clients are in open unemployment and the share is even higher among young beneficiaries (Rørbech et al. 1985). The poor population in Denmark has become younger. Over 40 per cent of them are under 25 years of age. Single persons and single mothers are strongly overrepresented (*ibid.*). As is also the case in the other Nordic countries the social-assistance clientele is dominated by single persons, not by families. Most of them are reported to have major problems in relationship to employment and monetary resources and more rarely severe social problems are at hand (Jørgensen & Thaulow 1984).

A study that followed a group of clients over time reported that some 15 per cent of them remained clients after 18 months (Rørbech et al. 1985:249–253). The younger and the better educated a person was, the lower the risk of remaining in poverty. Andersen and Elm Larsen (1989) estimated that almost 40 per cent of families on social assistance in 1985 were also assisted four years earlier, some 10 per cent for a consecutive period of four years.

A contradictory view on poverty in Denmark is given by Hansen (1986). Information based on level-of-living surveys from 1976 and 1986 shows a decrease in the numbers living under severely bad conditions. This refers to lack of social contacts, bad housing, bad work conditions and health problems for the population between 30 and 69 years of age (*ibid.*:128–129). In this case the references to uneven distribution of income and other conditions in the class structure are explicit and the perspective could thus be interpreted as an underclass view. Most of the opponents to Hansen argue that although living conditions have in general been improved the numbers of poor have increased and their marginality has become more pronounced over the last decade (Hansen et al. 1987; Hornemann Möller 1987; Andersen & Elm Larsen 1989). Thus, the opponents are closer to what has here been defined as a marginality view on poverty.

Danish studies of poverty and social-assistance clients rarely relate to the debate on feminization of poverty. Nor do they present subculture perspectives. The underclass perspective seems relevant to studies that show that the poor are almost exclusively recruited from the working class and in particular among unskilled workers with limited educational background (Jørgensen & Thaulow 1984; Hansen 1986). But the high shares that remain in poverty over long periods of time and the fact that the long-term poor also present more serious and accumulated problems would give support to the marginalization perspective (Andersen & Elm Larsen 1989:145–155).

Even in Finland the composition of the population on means-tested assistance has changed. Increasing numbers of young people, both males and females, and increasing numbers of single mothers are part of that change (Tanninen & Julkunen 1987). The proportion of singles without children is high but has decreased slightly in the 1980s and the proportion of families with children and single mothers has increased. A specific problem in Finland is the high proportion of students among the clients (*ibid.*:47–48). More than 20 per cent of the clients remain clients for more than five years (*ibid.*:48.). Large shares of the clients claim benefits from other

parts of the welfare system simultaneously, particularly unemployment insurance, sickness insurance or invalidity pensions. Even in Finland the most appropriate perspectives in relationship to these findings would be the underclass and marginalization perspectives.

Norwegian studies show that the growth of poverty is largest amongst singles, single mothers and young unemployed (Terum 1984a, 1984b; Stjernö 1985; Nervik 1987). They also show an increasing persistence of poverty despite the fact that most beneficiaries stay on support for very short periods. (Terum 1984b). The share of females exceeds that of males, but in absolute numbers men still dominate the stock of recipients of means-tested assistance (Terum 1985). Only few clients live in nuclear families where one person is in full time work. A number of Norwegian studies have verified that the need of social assistance is linked to deficiencies in the social-security system (Terum 1984b; Stjernö 1985; Hvinden 1988). Regional variations are great in Norway and the larger cities in particular have very high rates of social-assistance beneficiaries (Flaatten 1988). Most Norwegian studies support the marginalization perspective, but they also show a constant flow of people from the working class to temporary poverty which supports the underclass perspective. No support for a feminization of social-assistance claimants can be found in the Norwegian data on the growth in the 1980s (Hvinden 1988:29).

Similar to the situation in the other nations, the composition of Swedish clients has changed during the 1980s. They increasingly consist of singles without children, they have become younger and they stay in poverty for longer periods of time (Knutsson & Stridsman 1988). There is an increased share of male clients, but single mothers still face the highest risk of becoming beneficiaries (Gunnarsson 1990). Traditionally Swedish social sciences have located the problem of poverty in unemployment (Korpi 1971; Gustavsson 1983; Halleröd 1988). Thus, the underclass perspective dominates despite the fact that there are signs of increasing marginalization of poverty, even in Sweden. There is no information available to estimate persistence of poverty for larger populations or the causes behind prolonged dependency periods. In a study where they followed a group of male clients, Isaksson and Svedberg found that about 90 per cent of them remained in need of support after one year and that those in work were only partly able to support themselves (Isaksson & Svedberg 1989:20, 44). With the exception of the article by Gunnarsson, feminist interpretations of poverty in Sweden are rare (Gunnarsson 1990).

In sum, both available data and interpretations made by social scientists in the Nordic nations seem to exclude subcultural and feminist interpretations in general. Most of the debate seems to imply a combination of the underclass and the marginalization perspectives, where they explain different parts of the problem rather than being contradictory. Whereas the underclass perspective is supporting the temporary character of poverty, the marginalization position is supported by data that show that smaller shares of the poor have become increasingly excluded.

8. Concluding policy remarks

There may be theoretical and ideological as well as empirical reasons why different conceptions of poverty have an impact on research. A few words should be said about the implications for social policy of the different poverty perspectives.

Despite the fact that the number of articles on the feminization of poverty is large, it has not had much influence in Scandinavia. Nor do subcultural explanations have much impact on Scandinavian poverty research today.

The underclass and marginality perspectives are analytically similar but they have different policy implications. In the underclass tradition, where poverty is seen as temporary and part of a general problem of distribution, the cure is to keep unemployment low and to create a more even distribution of income. Poverty and need of social assistance is best resisted by general and universal social-policy measures. In the marginalization perspective these measures may not be completely effective other than to limit the numbers of people that are hit. To help those in poverty and particularly those who remain poor for longer time spells policies must be more specific. The long-term poor who are unable to get employment or qualify for general social security can be helped through selective policies such as sheltered jobs, education, specific support systems and possibly also psychological help.

Theories of subculture seem most relevant in suggesting individual social-work strategies concerned with motivation and the understanding of particular subgroups among the poor. But the culture-of-poverty position also inspires community action based in the local community or directed toward marginal groups involving networks and political participation.

In the feminization perspective, two different policy claims can be and have been made. The radical feminist version is directed toward improved conditions for women at work, increasing labor-market participation, child-care provisions and support systems from fathers. In the other version the nuclear family should be supported through measures such as tax relief for husbands or public support to females who prefer to stay at home with small children. Thus, the strategies of the two versions are often in political collision as dependency of the nuclear family is increased in one case and decreased in the other.

In sum, it seems obvious from the Scandinavian reality that neither feminization nor subculture perspectives have been able to produce a serious threat to the dominating underclass and marginalization views. The fact that large numbers of poor clients are only temporarily poor supports the underclass perspective. But increasing long-term poverty and increasing problems with the unemployment explanations will assist the proponents of marginalization.

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